

BOOK REVIEW

Joseph M. Felser. *The Way Back to Paradise: Restoring the Balance Between Magic and Reason*. Charlottesville, Va.: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc., 2004.

Reviewed by Matthew Fike, PhD

When Shakespeare writes in *As You Like It*, “Feed yourselves with questioning, / That reason wonder may diminish,” does he mean that reason diminishes wonder or that wonder diminishes reason? Shakespeare’s critics say both, an answer in which philosophy professor Joseph M. Felser would find strength and weakness. In Western culture, reason unfortunately diminishes wonder, but wonder does not have to diminish reason if the latter is not merely the “dissecting tool” of Descartes and the “adding machine” of Hume but also a faculty compatible with magic (“experiences of psychic sensitivity”). As Felser puts it in his thesis, “By sowing the seeds of our philosophical reflections in the fertile soil of our psychic sensitivity, sympathy, or whatever one wishes to call this natural magic, we are making our way back to paradise—the inward source of truth.” Elsewhere he calls paradise “the harmonizing of magic and reason” and a process rather than a destination. The purpose of relating his own story of recovered psychic sensitivity, then, is to inspire readers to open themselves and their reason to psychic experience.

The main cultural culprits in Felser’s view—science, education, consumerism, and religion—cut us off from our own nonphysical perception and from the earth. Even “official parapsychology is on the wrong track” because it has no place for anecdotal evidence, only replication and measurement (Charles Tart, though, receives praise for urging parapsychologists to discuss their own unusual experiences). Scientific fundamentalism and philosophical materialism prevail in Western culture and have a political dimension that Felser mentions but could have explored further (his next book perhaps?). He also attacks “Answerism,” the notion (especially the religious notion) that we have all the answers and do not need to ask any more questions.

A major symptom of dysfunction in Western society is the traditional interpretation of the Fall, which Felser (drawing on Freud, Jung, Campbell, and Bettelheim) rereads as the moment when authority superseded personal experience. Eve runs afoul of male authority by following her intuitive curiosity and by attempting to learn something directly from nature (the snake and the tree). Rather than documenting original sin as absolute Truth, the biblical story of the Fall allegorizes the stifling of our innate sensitivity. But in order to follow Eve’s path toward greater connectedness to inner and outer nature, we must overcome fear of expansion, of mystery, of the unknown. We must confront our inner demon (in Jungian terms, integrate the Shadow) so that the unconscious demon becomes a consciously perceived helper and friend.

Felser's own twenty-year journey from spiritual disconnectedness to psychic sensitivity illustrates the problem and solution just outlined. Synchronicities and imagination proved helpful in his unfolding, but dreams were the major waypoints. Much of *The Way Back to Paradise* is a record of the author's astute interpretation of significant dreams, and here he shows that he can walk the walk: his reason aids the analysis, but his philosophical training does not prevent him from thinking about dream texts in figurative and literary ways. Dreams may be Felser's main medium of psychic insight because his waking mind is so powerfully analytical. If so, his example reminds those of us who struggle to function psychically that it helps to switch off the thinking machine. Felser is not a world-class psychic like Robert Monroe or Joe McMoneagle, both of whom he occasionally quotes. He is a Bruce Moen-like Everyman who went in search of his inner resources and found them through diligent introspection and careful attention to nonverbal guidance. His trips to The Monroe Institute accelerated the process, the section on his experiences in *GATEWAY* and *LIFELINE*® is engaging, and his suggestions about validation through shared psychic experience there are well taken.

A synthesis of reason and magic suggests that a major objective of *The Way Back to Paradise* is to collapse binary oppositions: reason and magic can coexist; we do not have to choose one or the other. Showing us how an "either/or" view of reality has crippled Western society and arguing for a more inclusive "both/and" approach are the great strengths of this book. Falling into the same false dichotomy is its biggest weakness. Although Felser affirms the complementary roles of science and mysticism, he denies the compatibility of religion and inner experience. Persons either bow to patriarchal church authority and embrace its doctrinaire fanaticism or seek insight on their own from inner and outer nature as did the Native Americans (whom the author sometimes erroneously refers to as "Indians"). In Felser's view, "Piety is puffery," and Robert Monroe rightly refused to worship any "sacred cows." The author overlooks the presence of "Exceptional Human Experiences" (particularly psychic dreams) in the Bible and Christian tradition; and while Monroe may not have herded any sacred cows, he was pretty careful not to tip over anybody else's (the possible exception being "Cause the Bible Tells Me So," chapter 8 in *Journeys Out of the Body*). So it appears to me that Felser explodes the Western notion of binary opposition in one breath only to affirm it in the next. How can he advocate "the free play of consciousness" and still deny that psychic unfolding can occur in a conventional context? Felser's take on psychic functioning thus appears to include some philosophical bias.

In most ways, however, *The Way Back to Paradise* rings true and is a helpful example and blueprint for persons who wish to activate their innate psychic potential. It is a genuine relief to read a book that quotes Western philosophy and literature to bolster an argument about expanded awareness. The book's Jungian orientation is especially welcome, though Felser tinkers with Jungian terminology ("active imagination" becomes "a playful imagination," and "the collective unconscious" becomes "the collective psyche"). He deserves special commendation for allowing his students to be his teachers—many of his insights arose from

anecdotes that his students had shared with him. “Gladly would he learn and gladly teach,” as Geoffrey Chaucer puts it. Guidance can come from anywhere if we will look beyond “the veil of ordinariness” (a phrase I borrowed from New Testament scholar James I. Cook).

Finally, the book not only reflects the author’s Exceptional Human Experiences but may also promote readers’ own in the very act of reading. Toward the end of the book, for example, Felser relates a lengthy experience during the *Superflow* tape at *GATEWAY*. It ends this way: “I was welcomed by a man and woman to a strangely familiar log cabin set deep in a tranquil wood. Their German shepherd dog, a playful Cerberus, guide of souls, ran to greet me.” Quibbles aside (Cerberus is a guardian, not a guide), I recalled my own experience during the *Friends* tape at my second *GUIDELINES*®. I visited the Park where my late best friend Hal (*hal*, Old English, whole) lives in a cabin in the woods and enjoys spending time with his French girlfriend and his dog, Bratko (*patko*, Bulgarian, friend). I am grateful for the reminder and have no doubt that Professor Felser will smile when he learns that his book about synchronicity yielded a synchronous experience for his reviewer.

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